

Opinion: Thinking about natural gas and clean water

Publisher's note: *This editorial first ran in the March 22, 2011, New York Times.*

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar told a House subcommittee recently that a drilling technique known as hydraulic fracturing could be the "Achilles' heel" that kills the natural gas industry. Like many others, Mr. Salazar sees natural gas, which America has in great abundance, as cleaner and more climate-friendly than coal or oil and a useful transition to alternative fuels. But he also fears, as we do, that public support for drilling will diminish unless the industry and its state and federal regulators do a better job of making sure the gas does no harm to drinking water.

Hydraulic fracturing involves blasting water, sand and chemicals into underground rock formations to unlock the gas they contain. The technique has been around for many years and has been used, mostly without incident, in hundreds of thousands of natural gas wells. But the risks have multiplied as the wells are drilled deeper and stretched vertically and horizontally to get at remote deposits. A single well can cough up a million gallons of wastewater laced with carcinogens like benzene and radioactive elements like radium.

The technique has become especially controversial in Pennsylvania, the epicenter of a big push for natural gas locked in the Marcellus Shale, a formation stretching from West Virginia to upstate New York. Ian Urbina's recent series in The Times found that conventional wastewater treatment plants in Pennsylvania could not prevent radioactive contaminants from entering rivers that provide drinking water for millions of people. The series also identified many instances of poor regulation.

Read the whole story